A UNIVERSAL EMBODIMENT OF THE HERO
Translating the *Darangen* as a Ballet

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Everyone Loves a Hero

The function of a hero is to inspire a people. More than being a savior, he is "the realised ideal… the thing (people) are all wanting to be" (Carlyle 1841:8) and is so idealized because he is able to "blur the line between the human and the divine - not by demoting gods to humans but by elevating humans to the gods" (Segal 1991:6).

Prince Bantugen, of the epic chant *Darangen* of the Maranao people in Southern Philippines, is the most beloved character of this epic, and is distinct for having died then rescued from the Skyworld by his friends, then resurrected to save his people from their enemies (Maranan and Manuel 1994:334). Prince Bantugen is the central focus of the ballet *Darangen ni Bantugen,* which was performed by Philippine Ballet Theatre all over the Philippines while on commission from the Filipino Heritage Festival. The point in such a commission was to raise awareness among Filipinos about the richness of their heritage, and to remind them that there were already fully-functioning societies in the Philippine archipelago even before colonization.

The *Darangen* is an epic of the Maranao people. Passed on orally, it is chanted by a singer over several days. It celebrates

the history of the people, particularly the royal families of ancient Maranao kingdoms, emphasising their beliefs, traditions, and moral values, and relates the triumphs and trials of their pioneering leaders. With its animistic and mythical content, the Darangen is believed to have have existed long before the conversion of the Maranao people to Islam, although there are later versions of the epic that are revised to include Allah to replace spirits, as well as other Islamic elements (Madale and Cheng 1994:174). A majority of the episodes relay the adventures of Prince Bantugen (also called Bantogen or Bantugan) and includes encounters with a number of women that Bantugen becomes enamoured of, perhaps to emphasise Bantugen's power and virility, as befitting a hero of his stature. The epic chant garnered attention with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), granting it status as one of the world's masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritages of Humanity in 2005.

It becomes interesting then that a ballet interpretation of the *Darangen* is chosen to encourage Filipinos to be proud of their rich cultural heritage, firstly, because the epic chant belongs to only one minority group among several and in only one part of the country, and secondly, that the Maranao are not Catholic but Muslim. In addition, Muslim Mindanao takes pride in its resistance to Catholic domination to which the rest of the country succumbed in 1521 until 1989.

There is much to learn about Muslim Filipinos. Generally, the Philippines promotes a national culture that claims to be diverse, but in actuality, it promotes a dominant Christian-centric culture derivative of the West. The *Darangen*, for example, is introduced in elementary schools across the country, but usually only as an example of a Philippine epic in a lesson on local literature or as a lesson in dance forms, in particular, that of

the *singkil*. The epic chant as an oral tradition was first collected and made available in print in 1930 by American missionary Frank Laubach. A book of three volumes containing the 17 recognised episodes of the epic was published in 1986 up to 1988 by the Mindanao State University in Maranao, and then translated into English by Sr Maria Delia Coronel (Maranan and Manuel 1994:333).

Notwithstanding, the *Darangen* is still not popular as literature and shares the same fate as other epics in native dialects. A short story version of a chapter of the *Darangen,* on Prince Bantugen, is found in a school textbook *Dimensions in Learning English II: A Series for Philippine Secondary Schools* (1999), but this textbook is, again, not widely distributed across the country.

The traditional Maranao dance, the *singkil*, is said to depict a chapter from the *Darangen*, with the clashing bamboo poles reenacting an earthquake that the lead dancer, as Princess Gandingan, dexterously avoids by hopping over these poles, thereby comprising the dance. In performances of the *singkil*, it is possible for the *Darangen* epic to not be mentioned to the audience at all.

There is much to learn about the Muslim Maranao, and touring the *Darangen* throughout the country offers a glimpse into their culture, their differences and, more importantly, their similarities to the rest of the Filipino people. Translating the epic chant into a ballet for mass consumption may have its issues, but it has proven to be successful in the goal of the Filipino Heritage Festival to bring awareness of the epic to the rest of the country. Performing the chant itself during a national tour for educational purposes could be unwise, but a strategy could be devised to make the actual chant more accessible to a greater audience. In

promoting the *Darangen* as intangible cultural heritage, a ballet would seem a more universal medium.

Ballet as a Narrative

Ballet has the ability to tell a story without resorting to pantomime, after Jean Georges Noverre's development of the ballet d'action in the mid-1700s, by composing what Noverre called a series of "living tableaux" (Homans 2010:74). This, in effect, reconstructs the stage scene as a whole and flowed as a "slide show of paintings" (Homans 2010:75) to rhetorically impart the message of the dancing. It is through the ballet d'action that the stories of *Giselle, Coppelia, La Bayadere, Don Quixote, The Nutcracker*, and *Swan Lake*, and many other ballets, are understood by the audience.

For example, in *Giselle*, the scene in which Giselle makes her first appearance sets up the relationship between herself and the lead male danseur, Albrecht, who is a nobleman posing as a peasant to be able to spend time with his new infatuation. They mime their conversation, with Albrecht gesturing with his hands to coax Giselle to face him - advancing towards her all the while - and Giselle shyly reverting her gaze and running away at every opportunity. Where they are situated onstage is part of the choreography – and not just where the dancers happen to find themselves. there is a specific spot onstage where Albrecht takes her hand, another spot where he stops her from entering her house and leaving him, another spot where he picks a flower and offers it to her, another spot where she pulls off the petals to determine, "He loves me, he loves me not." The movement from a designated spot to another is also choreographed, and is part of how the stage scene is constructed as a whole.

Without this ballet d'action, the production will fail to establish how Albrecht is able to gain her trust and how he is able to make her fall in love with him. This will make her discovery of his betrayal - that he is a nobleman already betrothed to a duchess - significant to the audience, and will contribute to the credibility of Giselle dying of a broken heart.

This established tradition of ballet d'action is also used in the creation of full-evening Filipino ballets, and is used to convey the story of *Darangen ni Bantugen.*

Ballet in the Philippines

Ballet is a popular art form in the Philippines. It may be seen as a Philippine tradition as it has been embedded in Philippine culture for almost a century. Introduced during the American colonial period (1898-1946), ballet gained momentum when prima ballerina Anna Pavlova performed at the Manila Grand Opera House in 1922 during her famous world tour. Her performances were a catalyst to a widespread ballet fever, and Polish and Russian émigrés fleeing the revolution saw Manila as a viable option for a new life, opening ballet schools, and setting the course for history. The schools produced ballerinas and danseurs who would open their own schools, organize their own companies and stage productions, and establish a healthy tradition that allowed the existence of three major companies with regular performances, as well as artistic and financial success.

The Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) was a project of the former First Lady Imelda Marcos to project an image of a unified progressive nation under President Ferdinand Marcos' rule (1965-1986). The CCP is a symbol of prestige,

credibility, artistic progress, and a preserver of a national identity. Gradually, the CCP took into its residence a national orchestra, a short-lived opera company, a folk dance troupe, and a ballet company which was first called the CCP Dance Company and evolved into Ballet Philippines. Eventually, two more major ballet companies were established: the Philippine Ballet Theatre, also under the CCP, and Ballet Manila, which had a private sponsor.

The Marcos regime was instrumental in increasing ballet's following and in its acceptance as an art form by providing lavish funding for its development under the CCP. The regime's downfall significantly affected how dance continued to develop. The CCP Dance Company had been programmed to produce full-length ballets alongside new choreographic works with Filipino themes in order to establish its capacity for both high art and folk art - high art, to exemplify the advanced capabilities of the Philippines as an emerging nation, and folk art, to show that before modernization, indigenous Philippines had a thriving civilization.

In this way, ballet was used as a heritage tool in the promotion of folk and ethnic dance to establish a strong national identity - despite dismissive opinions from scholars that ballet cannot be a Philippine art form. Joann Ke'aliinohomoku challenges the notion of western scholars regarding "ethnic dance" by taking ballet as a platform on which to interrogate the use of "ethnic" as a "euphemism for such old-fashioned terms as 'heathen,' 'pagan,' 'savage,' or the more recent term, 'exotic.'" Ke'aliinohomoku suggests that "ethnic dance" should instead mean "a dance form of a given group of people who share common genetic, linguistic, and cultural ties" and, as such, is therefore a redundancy since all dances may be described in this manner. Ke'aliinohomoku concludes that the term ethnic dance

should apply to ballet since ballet is a dance form that "reflects the cultural traditions from which it developed" (Ke'aliinohomoku 2001:42).

Embedded in Philippine culture since the 1920s, ballet does reflect Philippine cultural traditions as it developed through the years. Evidence of this can be seen in the repertoire of Ballet Philippines and Philippine Ballet Theatre, and in how the repertoire was determined and programmed to Filipinize ballet for relevancy in the propagation of national identity. To achieve this, most Filipino ballets were transformed from folk culture. There were ballets depicting traditional rituals and practices, retelling heroic epics and folk tales, and dramatizing the events of the 1896 revolution. Further Filipinization entailed using movements and gestures from Philippine folk dances to accentuate balletic steps – some of which were successful, others treading on cultural irresponsibility. In general, however, following Ke'aliinohomoku's definition of ethnic dance, these Filipino ballets succeeded in reflecting Philippine culture.

What makes a Filipino Ballet Filipino?

"Filipinizing" ballet began as early as 1927, the year Polish émigré Luva Adameit returned to the Philippines and set up a ballet school. Incidentally, Adameit first came to the Philippines with Pavlova in 1922. The recitals her Cosmopolitan Ballet and Dancing School presented included her own choreographies of *Planting Rice, Cariñosa,* and *Maria Clara*, all with Filipino themes. *Planting Rice* has been described as a ballet en pointe, with dancers pricking the floor with the tips of their pointe shoes in order to plant rice (Villaruz 1994). *Cariñosa* and *Maria Clara,* meanwhile, are based on Hispanized

folk dances that were learned during the Spanish colonial period (1521-1898). In the same manner that Marius Petipa's orientalization of ballet produced the Indian-themed *La Bayadere*, Adameit adapted balletic movement to make familiar a foreign dance form to her local would-be dance students (Jacinto 2007). This was followed by Adameit's contemporaries and was continued by their students and their students' students.

Even while performing a classical European repertoire, Filipino choreographers were at the same time developing their own choreographies - with Filipino themes, stories, and music - and borrowing from Filipino dances. Most early Philippine-themed work were mostly neoclassic ballets or modern dance works that used a rural or pre-colonial royal backdrop to appear Filipino. These were based on stories written by Filipino authors or myths handed down through generations.

Ballet steps were Filipinized, initially by simply flexing the hands and holding them angularly in contrast to classical ballet which is typically rounder. Over time, folk dance research expanded the material that local choreographers could use in their work, with appropriations and abstractions into contemporary form, and the utilization of particular choreographic devices. As an example, the choreographer Agnes Locsin, according to Sally Ness, succeeded in Filipinizing ballet with *Igorot*, which demanded dancers to distribute their weight on the ground to approximate the native dances from the ethnic communities in the Cordillera mountains. This approach is a total opposite of classical ballet in its predication on lightness and defiance of gravity.

Gener Caringal choreographed *Vinta* in 1988, and since then, it has been regularly staged in Philippine Ballet Theatre's repertoire. The inspiration for the work is the sails of the *vinta*, a traditional boat associated with the Bajau and found in the Sulu

archipelago and in other areas of Southern Mindanao. The flexed hands and the carriage of the head and upper body mimics traditional dances associated with Muslim communities in Mindanao, including the *singkil* of the Maranao and the *Pangalay* of the Tausug. The movement vocabulary of *Vinta* serves as a foundation for Caringal, who draws from it to choreograph *Darangen ni Bantugen*, developed 20 years later.

The Darangen Translated as a Ballet

Philippine Ballet Theatre produced *Darangen ni Bantugen* in three acts, focusing on the events leading up to Bantugen meeting Datimbang, with the latter serving as the ballet's heroine. There are two choreographers who share credit for the ballet: Gener Caringal and Ronilo Jaynario, with Caringal acting as chief dramaturg and overall director of the production. Jaynario's task was mostly to construct ensemble dances; in later stagings, he had the liberty to change some sections, for example, adjusting the virtuosic solo for the bird in Act I. Music was composed by Jesse Lucas to a libretto by Maria Lourdes Sanchez, while Salvador Bernal created the set and costume design. The title *Darangen ni Bantugen*, translated as The Epic Song of Bantugen, refers to the concentration of the ballet on Bantugen, as other chapters in the epic focus on Bantugen's father and children, and are not featured in the ballet.

The curtains open in the Kingdom of Bumbaran, and the court prepares for the arrival of Princess Magimar, a new bride for the king, Datu Madali. Madali's brother, the beloved Prince Bantugen, is captivated by his brother's bride and dances with her. As Bantugen is young, vibrant, and handsome, Magimar flirts with him and dances with him seductively. This is the first

pas de deux of the ballet, supported by a corps de ballet of maidens and warriors, who function to distract King Madali's attentions, hiding the fact that his brother is flirting with his new bride.

Inevitably, Madali catches the two in an embrace and furiously banishes his brother from the kingdom, declaring him dead. The court and all the people in the kingdom are not allowed to acknowledge Bantugen's presence, lest they be banished as well. Although apparently devastated and contrite, Bantugen dutifully and immediately leaves the palace. Or, in the staging, the palace disappears as the dancers exit and the lights darken, with only one spotlight focused on Bantugen as he runs across the stage, allowing the crew to change scenes inconspicuously, stripping Bernal's elaborate palace set to a bare stage, designed only with lighting effects.

Although it is not stated in the programme notes, the epic does mention Madali's envy towards the charisma of his brother (Villanueva 1999:99). As a hero, Bantugen is not a king, yet he is more beloved than the king, functioning as the leader of their army, and therefore the people's savior. He is not the ruler, which Madali is, and therefore not directly responsible for the run of regular government. This perhaps is partly what Madali envies, and why the people prefer him to their king.

As Bantugen sets off, he dwells a bit on his misery but soon enough stumbles upon the vision of a beautiful woman who lives in the Kingdom Between The Two Seas. This vision is of the Princess Datimbang. Suddenly filled with purpose, Bantugen begins what turns out to be a treacherous journey. He battles elementals of fire, earth, wind, and water one after the other, and although triumphantly overcoming all of these, he is quite badly beaten. On stage, the fire elemental is a number of male dancers running around Bantugen, carrying red and yellow

flags; they are the frenzied blaze that Bantugen can only step aside to avoid. The earth elemental is another set of the male ensemble carrying bamboo poles to hoist up a lead earth monster, with whom Bantugen has a fight scene involving movements that recall wrestling and karate. The earth elemental is sometimes only this one person, but at other times, can also transform into a larger monster, with dancers manipulating the bamboo poles to simulate large jaws that attempt to bite Bantugen, or worse, to swallow him whole.

The wind elementals are the female ensemble flying at him with different leaps, all the while flicking scarves at him, delicately yet sharply. Bantugen is unable to avoid these attacks because, as soon as he comes close to any of the dancers, they evaporate and are whooshed away in swift, graceful motions. The water elemental is a large sheet of white cloth stretching across the expanse of the stage, catching Bantugen within its waves as it is flipped from stage right to left and upstage to downstage, and vice versa, until the hero is finally spent.

Before collapsing, he calls upon his spirit protector, the Diwata. In Philippine mythology, a *diwata* is a forest spirit with supernatural powers. In this ballet, while there are several *diwata*s who appear to help Bantugen, his particular spirit protector is their leader. She wears a purple dress while the rest are in blue. The fairies dance as they appear onto the stage, delighted to be in Bantugen's presence. As Bantugen loses consciousness, the fairies transport him to the nearest kingdom for human assistance. Fortunately, the fairies bring him to Bantugen's intended destination, the Kingdom Between the Two Seas. The journey of Bantugen to this kingdom originally entailed placing a bamboo pole under his arms and back, which the fairies had to carry, in fours, two fairies on each side of the

prince. They moved Bantugen forward in circular motions, as if to simulate a long flight.

As Princess Datimbang's medicine man attends to the sleeping prince, the Angel of Death arrives at the court and extracts Bantugen's soul from his body, thereby killing him. This section is constructed as a typical ballet d'action, complete with a frenzied corps de ballet running around in the background and aided by lighting effects to heighten the tension of the scene. As the angel flees in triumph, the Diwata, Datimbang, and the rest of the court are left to mourn.

A bird flies - or grand jetés - into the castle. It is Prince Bantugen's pet bird, often described as a parrot in the oral epic, who has been looking for her master ever since he had been banished from Bumbaran. When the bird sees his body, she confirms through mime that it is her master (placing her hands atop her head to signify a crown) and asks Princess Datimbang to bring the body back to his home kingdom. Act I ends with an entourage of the dancers taking the body of the Prince to the upstage left corner, all in a solemn queue led by the bird, her wings opened to full span. Bantugen's body is carried by the warriors on a firm cot and flanked by the Diwata and Princess Datimbang. The entourage moves slowly, making slow, languid steps timed to the music's extension of that section's final notes to signify the beginning of a long journey.

Following the *Darangen* epic, the bird is designated as a pet, but it is also a lookout and messenger. The latter functions are seen in the second act when she accompanies Bantugen's best friends, the warriors Mabaning and Magali, to the Skyworld, to retrieve Bantugen's soul from the Angel of Death. They are given permission to do so by King Madali, who, upon hearing the news of his brother's death, is instantly regretful, decreeing that Bantugen is forgiven.

Mabaning is male but engages in some gender bending in an attempt to distract the enemy while trying to track Bantugen among the many souls in the Skyworld: he dresses in a *mahlong* to flirt with the Angel of Death. Hiding his face and his body in the traditional Muslim attire, Mabaning sways his hips to entice the Angel, holding out a bare arm and snatching it back before the Angel could hold it and kiss it. He acts demure and modest to hide his otherwise obvious masculinity, but is sexually aggressive beneath the cover-up. This is achieved through the subtleties in the choreography, and it would perhaps not be effective if enacted in a different medium. As the enamoured Angel of Death promises Mabaning the world for a kiss, he cleverly asks for flowers instead - unavailable in the Skyworld, but abundant in the realm of the living. It is while the Angel has exited the stage to fetch flowers for Mabaning that he, Magali, and the bird find Bantugen's soul (a doll made of cloth) and carries it back to Bumbaran, in time for Bantugen to win the war for his brother.

For continuity, events that were originally unrelated in the epic are sewn together, such as King Miskoyaw's sudden attack on Bumbaran. Miskoyaw is a distant relative who greedily sees Bantugen's banishment as an opportunity to seize the kingdom for his own. In the original account, this incident does not happen in the same song cycle as Bantugen's death and resurrection. Bantugen is known as an adventurer and is always off to some distant land, banished or not, and usually comes home with a new wife. In the ballet, in much the same way as any dramatic fighting is staged, Bantugen defeats Miskoyaw and the latter's army surrenders.

The ballet, of course, ends with a wedding dance for Bantugen and Datimbang.

Conclusion

In his essay, "Dancing the National Drama: The Muslim South in Filipino Dance," William Peterson discusses how the dances from the Southern regions of the Philippines, which are predominantly Muslim, are used as symbols of a "proud, vigorous, independent nation," despite the irony of this representation when the rest of the Philippines is predominantly Catholic. He offers that this representation of a rich and sophisticated pre-colonial heritage is compensation for the harsh realities that Filipinos have to live with, to give them an ideal to aspire to.

He also offers how this appropriation of culture is problematic, given the ongoing war in the Philippines' southern-most region and its continuing bid for autonomy. Promoting the dance, and, in effect, the culture of an oppressed minority to represent the nation may come off as hypocritical and misleading.

The Festival, and choreographers, took great care to emphasize which culture in the Philippines was being represented and they were mindful of the possibility of misrepresentation. Intensive research on the originating community's cultural practices were conducted before, and even during, the creation of *Darangen ni Bantugen*. The translation of the epic chant into ballet transformed the material almost completely. *Darangen ni Bantugen* had been presented with the purpose of projecting a desired "unified national culture" (2003:43), but would this have been appropriate?

When the ballet first premiered, a few members in the audience were from the Maranao, and they approached Caringal after the performance to share their appreciation of the depiction of their culture. They particularly mentioned how the scene with

the souls behind sheets of plastic was just how they envisioned the Sky World would be, as their local beliefs described their souls placed in jars. They also saw the ballet-dancing Bantugen as the same hero they idealised (Jacinto 2008).

The ballet adaptation of *Darangen ni Bantugen* introduced the epic to a wider audience. Although it may be seen as a commercialization of the work - as the process of transforming the medium to make it more palatable to mass audiences often seems - the translation of the spoken word to dance successfully conveys the narrative regardless of language restrictions. International audiences, particularly to performances at the Arts Festival in China, were immediately appreciative of the story, and viewed the epic as representative of the national culture of the Philippines.

Overall, it can be said that through this ballet, Philippine audiences accept the Maranao epic as part of their national culture. Bantugen is a hero to them as well.

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